

## **‘Ireland mustn’t be such a bad place so’: Mapping the “Real” Terrain of the Aran Islands**

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Martin McDonagh’s *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996) responds to and encodes the complexities of representational and ecological issues surrounding life on the rural landscape of the Aran Islands. The three islands that constitute the Aran Islands—Inisheer, Inishmaan, and Inishmore—occupy a unique and dual position of marginality and liminality; they not only reside off the border of the western coast of Ireland but also inhabit an indeterminate space between America and Europe. The archipelagos are described by Irish poet Seamus Heaney as a place “Where the land ends with a sheer drop / You can see three stepping stones out of Europe.”<sup>1</sup>

*Inishmaan* employs three strategic interrogations—representation, structure, and aesthetics—that coincide with the project of collaborative ecology. The first strategy juxtaposes two contrasting representations of Ireland’s 1930s rural west, problematizing the notion of a definable Irishness in relation to the unique Arans landscape. *Inishmaan* revolves around the filming of the American documentary *Man of Aran* (1934), which claims authenticity in its representation of actual island residents. McDonagh’s depiction of the Aran community, however, contradicts the documentary’s poetic vision of the Aran Islands as a pristine landscape. In scene eight, for example, the screening of *Man of Aran* does not reflect a mirror image of the Aran residents represented in the play; the film, contrarily, incites mockery. Despite its claim of historical authenticity and authority, the documentary proves fictional. *Inishmaan* contests the legitimacy of *Man of Aran* explicitly as well as a history of romanticized notions of western Irish identity implicitly. McDonagh’s interrogation of the ontological status of the film’s authoritative narrative and imagery, furthermore, generates tension between the fictive representations that open conceptual spaces in which to negotiate alternate depictions of Aran life.

The conceptual fissures, which seemingly separate, operate as points of symbiosis by way of the second interrogation, which takes the form of a structural strategy. Fixed boundaries that underscore separateness are challenged in *Inishmaan* through the structural engagement of opposing, fictional representations. In a similar way, the “sheer drop” of an Aran crag that physically segregates the land from sea, as Heaney observes, may be recognized, especially in the contemporary context of Celtic Tiger prosperity, as a “stepping stone” into Ireland rather than as

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an avenue only of departure. The spaces of encounter that are prised open as a result of structural tension in *Inishmaan* expose a threshold and catalyst for interchange. From an eco-critical perspective, an examination of the fissures in *Inishmaan*, precisely by way of the contradictory representations of Aran life, correspond to fractures that displace the human from the non-human world. A collision, for example, occurs between the film's scenario, which operates from a human-centered perspective especially in regards to its modes of production and consumption, and the play's narrative, which depicts an indifference to the project of nurturing non-human and human ecologies. The fictive statuses of both narratives collide, inverting the focus on the illusory to unearth a space for sorting tension and catalyzing a process of negotiation. Investigation of the relationship between human life and the other-than-human environment in dramatic texts and performances in general may enable a wider and deeper understanding of eco-critical implications. The representational and structural strategies in *Inishmaan* activate interconnectedness in a way that resonates with the promise of strengthening ecological bonds between the human and non-human world and of promoting an overall engagement with issues of environmental sustainability and equilibrium.

The third strategic interrogation takes the form of a metatheatrical device that generates a desire for the "real" beyond referential knowledge. The colliding narratives open sites of psychic knowledge that trace the past rather than look toward a symbiotic future. The fissures mark a presence of absent trauma, which incites a play of desire for unknowable knowledge. "Absent trauma," Elizabeth Cowie professes, "signifies an unrepresented that is also unrepresentable."<sup>2</sup> The "unrepresentable" trauma, characterized as unknowable, provokes a yearning for the real. The desire for the real, Cowie explains, "is the desire for some little bit of absence by which the possibility of presence is affirmed while yet restating loss, absence itself."<sup>3</sup> The real emerges as a representation of trauma performed through repetition.<sup>4</sup> Repetitive utterances or actions psychically express buried and forgotten histories located somewhere between the past and present. The contested realism of the documentary paradoxically serves to legitimize traces of trauma in the play's fictive narrative. *Inishmaan* operates as evidence that detects unrepresentable traumas that recall histories of broken lands, histories, homes, and bodies. Cripple Billy, the young protagonist, for instance, embodies such fractures. Trauma, however, is not a reverberation of a particular historical moment, such as the Great Famine, a period when the environment seems to exercise its power over the human world. The force of unrepresentable trauma manifests itself in the tension between the desire for a spectacle of the unknown real and the uncertainty of reality. The performance of repetition enacts the impact of what Cathy Caruth calls "unclaimed experience,"<sup>5</sup> which accentuates in *Inishmaan* issues of death, survival, departure, and return.

Thus the strategic interrogations in *Inishmaan* function in three ways. The first strategy underscores the fictional status of the documentary and the limits of representation. The second interrogation structurally explodes the reception of historical reality to unearth spaces of potential interchange. The final strategy metatheatrically maps absent trauma that lures the spectator's desire for sensory knowledge of the real. The performance of trauma generates an aesthetic effect that, paradoxically, attempts to transform the impact of histories of departure into promises of return.

### **Representing Physical Realities and Desired Imaginings**

*Inishmaan* explores the profound relationship between physical realities and desired imaginings in its dramatic representation of the Aran community. The people of the Aran Islands are verily vulnerable to difficult physical realities. The islands are made of rock; their foundations consist of formations of limestone, which makes production, especially agricultural, challenging. The Arans, additionally, experience the collisions of the surrounding sea and winds. Exposure to elements of nature causes copious cracks on the surface of the rock foundations. The porous limestone terrain absorbs sea sprays and rainwater through the process of osmosis creating crevices. It is, paradoxically, those fissures that enable life. Deep within the crevices there dwells a minimal amount of soil that may be hand scooped to assist in the cultivation of farmland. The cracks in the limestone also serve as animal habitats as well as burial sites. The gaps, initiated through a process of decay, therefore, work to nourish and preserve life and death, creating a sort of ecological equilibrium.

The island of Inishmaan, which is the 1930s setting of McDonagh's play, inhabits the space between Inishmore and Inisheer. Inishmaan is the most remote of the three islands. Until the early twentieth century, it presented the biggest obstacle to visit by boat. For that reason it had the least intercultural influence, therefore maintaining its Irish language, traditions, and customs more than the other islands. It is ironically fitting then that McDonagh chooses the site of Inishmaan to illustrate the constructedness of Irish identity. Through his contemporary lens, 1930s Inishmaan embodies dark, eccentric personalities that reflect the decay of tradition as well as the Aran terrain. Both land and body echo an empty sense of Irishness.

The harsh physical realities of life on the Aran Islands, paradoxically, have inspired many desired imaginings. Desired imaginings are perceptions or assumptions that claim to have evidentiary value but are generated by the nostalgic desire for purity or harmony perceived in the "other." Such fanciful narratives may be innocuous unless their constructedness is disingenuously concealed. When desired imaginings operate from a position of human centeredness, it commonly follows that the non-human environment suffers detrimentally from submission to authoritative narratives that attempt to fix forms and ideas. Desired imaginings,

however, sometimes prove inspirational. Irish history, for instance, is commingled with ancient myth, and the culture is auspiciously known for its flourishing storytellers. W. B. Yeats (1865–1939) encouraged J. M. Synge (1871–1909) to visit the Aran Islands “to express a life that has never found expression.”<sup>6</sup> Yeats’s idea of conjuring was embraced by Synge, whose experiences and observations on the Arans (at irregular intervals from 1898 to 1901) prompted him to write prolifically, including the plays *Riders to the Sea* (1905) and the Dublin riot-inducing *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907).<sup>7</sup>

Synge’s plays, especially those aforementioned, directly influence McDonagh’s oeuvre.<sup>8</sup> Synge expresses the purity and primitiveness of the islands as well as mythologizes the bravery of the people who withstand the violence of nature and man. Synge writes, “In a way it is all heartrending, in one place the people are starving but wonderfully attractive and charming.”<sup>9</sup> Luke Gibbons states that Synge finds “an aesthetic dimension” in the destitute condition of the rugged countryside.<sup>10</sup> Christopher Murray likewise argues, “Synge read into the landscape his own romantic melancholy, and the landscape gave him back examples of the co-existence of death and endurance, material hardship, and spiritual wonder, desolation and transcendence. The Aran Islands were for Synge a two-way mirror, of his and the nation’s soul.”<sup>11</sup> Synge’s two-way perception perhaps allows him to create works of art that “enabled the nation to grow into violent self-discovery.”<sup>12</sup> Robert J. Flaherty’s (1884–1951) documentary portrayal of the Aran Islands, *Man of Aran*, also resonates with romantic notions of Ireland’s rural west. Flaherty, however, effects nostalgia and takes a human-centered approach in the form of one-way perception in his Aran representation. The characters in *Inishmaan* do not identify with the images of Aran life presented in the film, even though Flaherty is a highly regarded and influential “reality” director. The difference between the projects of Synge and Flaherty is that the former “came not [to the Aran Islands] as a ‘colonist’ to plunder, but as a student, to learn.”<sup>13</sup>

Flaherty, deemed the “dean of American documentarians,” was encouraged, like Synge, to visit the Aran Islands in the 1930s.<sup>14</sup> At the suggestion of John Grierson, who first used the term “documentary” to describe factual film, Flaherty employs the Aran Islands as his subject and site of production.<sup>15</sup> The early definition of documentary, generally accredited to Grierson, is “the creative treatment of actuality,” but *Man of Aran* occupies more of an imaginary terrain. Ruth Barton and Harvey O’Brien state, “Reality is no longer captured unproblematically via the camera lens but patterned via the filmmakers’ aesthetic constructions.”<sup>16</sup> Acknowledging the impossibility of objectivity in the contemporary moment, however, does not shroud additional representational issues surrounding the film’s authenticity and Flaherty’s authority. Flaherty, for example, takes on the arduous task of casting rural “actors” to construct a fictional nuclear Irish family.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, his failure to learn the Irish language hinders his communications

with cast and crewmembers.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the Irish characters in the film are literally without a voice. Other than the sounds of the surging sea and winds, the audio track rumbles with inaudible articulations of the island residents.<sup>19</sup> Flaherty's American identity, moreover, raises authority issues. He, for instance, does not attempt to adapt to the poverty-stricken community. Harry Watt, a Scottish film student and Flaherty's production assistant on *Man of Aran* remarks, "The extraordinary thing was that Flaherty lived like a king in these primitive places . . . I never lived so well in my life."<sup>20</sup> Thus Flaherty's occupation on the Aran Islands illustrates a lack of ecological interconnectedness. In fact, his grand narrative depicts man as the master of the environment.

In one scene *Man of Aran*, the father of the nuclear family unit, perseveres in the slow, laborious process of creating artificial soil out of crushed rock, seaweed, and sand, in addition to small amounts of soil meticulously excavated from crevices in the land. Ironically, Flaherty's technique of using realism does not result in the portrayal of reality. The practice of building farmland, for example, was already fading from tradition in the 1930s. Flaherty captures the process on film, which fulfills an ideology of mastery over the environment.<sup>21</sup> The narrative portrays *Man of Aran* as a hero of a landscape that does not provide the basic ingredients for survival. Gibbons notes that this type of representation "echoes Rousseau's reconstruction of an imaginary 'state of nature' before the eventual fall from grace brought about by civilisation."<sup>22</sup> Such a descent is apparent in *Inishmaan*, which presents the undeveloped, physically challenged Cripple Billy as the hero of an equally impotent landscape. While the documentary depicts man's conquering of the environment, the play exhibits a marked disconnection between human and other-than-human life. Watching cows to relieve boredom is Cripple Billy's closest commune with nature. Furthermore, human violence is commonly enacted on animals and humans alike in McDonagh's depiction of Aran life. Absent is the industrious and healthful Irish father figure of *Man of Aran* that makes fertile the unsullied rock foundation.

The ecological implication of Flaherty's "special veracity" is that his ahistorical representation continues to influence perceptions of the relationship between the human and non-human environment.<sup>23</sup> Seven months of each year, for instance, *Man of Aran* continues to be presented in multiple daily showings at the Aran Centre on Inishmaan.<sup>24</sup> Flaherty's claim of authenticity, which is clearly contested in *Inishmaan*, begs the question of whose desire is being fulfilled in the documentary. While *Man of Aran* ensures his own survival and through the documentary image secures a sort of immortality, Cripple Billy, who embodies an entirely antithetical site of knowledge and production, faces a sure death. McDonagh's play in the contemporary moment indeed exposes an impoverished cultural space, perhaps the void that remains after the deconstruction of Flaherty's vision.

### Interrogating Sites of Collision

The tension between physical realities and desired imaginings is intensified in the screening of the documentary, which, in the play, takes place at the local church hall. On the sheet that serves as a makeshift screen, Man of Aran and his fellow fishermen are seen on a *curragh*, or a small boat, hunting a basking shark, generally about thirty feet in length. The community is in attendance, including Kate and Eileen (who are sisters and foster-aunts to Cripple Billy), Helen (Billy's love interest, who randomly exhibits cruel and violent behavior), and Bartley (Helen's younger brother):

KATE (*pause*): That's a big fish.

EILEEN: 'Tis a shark, Kate.

KATE: 'Tis a wha?

EILEEN: A shark, a shark!

HELEN: Have you forgot what a shark is, on top of talking to stones?

BARTLEY: It's mostly off America you do get sharks, Mrs, and a host of sharks, and so close to shore sometimes they come, sure, you wouldn't even need a telescope to spot them, oh no . . .

HELEN: Oh telescopes, Jesus . . . !

BARTLEY: It's rare that off Ireland you get sharks. This is the first shark I've ever seen off Ireland.

JOHNNY: Ireland mustn't be such a bad place so if sharks want to come to Ireland.<sup>25</sup>

The characters reject the authenticity of the hunt. Arans residents hunted basking sharks, also known as sunfish, not in the 1930s when Flaherty filmed the documentary but nearly one hundred years earlier.<sup>26</sup> Helen, who previously sought to be cast in the film to achieve Hollywood fame, now hurls eggs at the screen. She says, "Ah they're never going to be catching this fecking shark. A fecking hour they've been at it now, it seems like. . . . One good clobber and we could all go home."<sup>27</sup> In deconstructing the documentary, *Inishmaan* does not merely seek to replace Flaherty's images; it shows the limits of representation.

The "actors" in the film frequently endure the dangers of drowning to ensure that the community is shown in its "true light."<sup>28</sup> It is necessary for them to maneuver the twists and turns of the sea in order to safely exit and enter the shore. They survive the constant threat of instantaneous eruptions of storms that have the power to overwhelm the *curragh* and drown everyone on board. Flaherty's assistant director and Aran native resident, Pat Mullen, recalls:

There was a frightful sea running. . . . I had caught a glimpse of Mr. Flaherty's face when Tommy Fitz said that he couldn't

get a crew to venture out with him, and it looked as stormy as rounding Cape Horn. Of course, there was a far bigger reason than that driving me out that day . . . [The film] was to be of my Island and of my people, and seeing that I had a little to say in the making of it, well, as far as I could help I would. And I made up my mind to show my people in their *true light*.<sup>29</sup>

Mullen finds the last living shark fisherman, who on his deathbed relays information on how to successfully harpoon a basking shark. The crewmembers reconstruct the tradition and then learn the lost “art” of their forefathers.<sup>30</sup> Paradoxically, the operation serves as a sort of community bonding and commemoration, allowing the past to be re-lived. Another danger, besides the perils of the sea, is that locals confuse realities. Mullen contends in his memoir, *Man of Aran* (1935), “[L]ives lost or not, the *Man of Aran* ought to be made the real thing or nothing.”<sup>31</sup> The men of Aran learn the human-centered value of conquering their own environment. The unnecessary killing of such scarce marine life as the basking shark is reminiscent of outlanders plundering the Aran environment: “Nowadays we catch only mackerel or herring; there are practically no other fish because foreign trawlers have swept them away and also ruined the spawning grounds.”<sup>32</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the basking shark was hunted for its liver, which produced oil for lamplight. During the process of filming in the 1930s, however, an indefinite number of sharks are harpooned and killed. Mullen states that “many fish” are harpooned but escape.<sup>33</sup> Mullen’s memoir specifically recounts twelve episodes of harpooning sharks and records the occurrence of four certain killings. Mullen declares, furthermore, “We killed many more and had some exciting times. . . . Luckily, before they disappeared [for the season,] Mr. Flaherty had taken enough pictures to finish the basking shark sequence for the film.”<sup>34</sup> Weather conditions prevent some of the killings from being captured successfully on film. In the chapter entitled “Exciting Days,” Mullen describes “the most thrilling sight,” which is watching a harpoon being driven full force into a shark and its responsive thrash in the water.<sup>35</sup> That particular account marks the second killing of a shark, and, as in the previous instance, Flaherty fails to capture the harpooning on film. The harpooners eventually sink the slain basking sharks “by tying heavy stones to [them].”<sup>36</sup>

The structural engagement of the incompatible presentations of the 1930s Aran community generates ambivalence about the certainty of knowledge. The characters of *Inishmaan*, for example, do not relate to the assiduousness of the film’s maternal figure, who tirelessly hauls heavy loads of water-soaked seaweed up the cliffs in order to cultivate a small patch of crops. Nor do the images invoke a desire of mimesis. In *Inishmaan*, the family unit and work ethic have disintegrated. Mothers are absent or close to being non-existent. Kate, Cripple Billy’s surrogate



aunt, fills the role of the absent mother, but she exhibits a decaying of the psyche through her compulsion to talk to rocks when anxieties overcome her. In a twisted sort of role reversal, Johnny feeds his mother, Mammy, bottles of alcohol. The characters' gazes upon their supposed selves at the screening of *Man of Aran*, contrarily, become gapes upon the constructed "Other."

Kevin Rockett, who examines the power of the "uncertainty principle" in the disruption of romantic imagery in contemporary Irish cinema, argues, "[T]he most innovative films in contemporary Irish cinema seek not to disown the powerful romantic legacy but to prise open these fissures, exposing the ideological fault-lines in the landscape."<sup>37</sup> McDonagh's drama functions in a similar fashion. Helen unveils an abyss, for instance, expressing her lack of fulfillment at the film's end: "Oh thank Christ the fecker's over. A pile of fecking shite."<sup>38</sup> The characters of *Inishmaan* resist being absorbed into Flaherty's ideological landscape. Their responses fracture the film's narrative and reveal its "fault-lines." Correspondingly, the collisions of the mediated versions unearth the potential to negotiate additional representations of Aran life.

*Inishmaan* thus maps conceptual fissures detectable in the structure of competing representations. The fissures between representations, like the crevices of the landscape that enclose rich soil, hold the promise of interconnectedness and sustainability. The site also generates a desire for the real, or spectacles of sensory knowledge. The performance of unrepresentable trauma marks the traces of forgotten histories, whose mysterious shadows of an intangible past haunt the present.

### Performing Unrepresentable Trauma

Cripple Billy represents the unrepresentable. He signifies a present absence through his disfigured body, which represents unknown trauma excluded from *Man of Aran*. McDonagh's disruption of Flaherty's scenario opens a conceptual space in which to empathize with Cripple Billy. The performance of unrepresentable trauma permits the spectator to gain psychic knowledge and to identify with the characters' experiences of absence and loss.<sup>39</sup> The process of identification makes it possible for the spectator to become a knowing subject who empathizes with the narrative of death and survival. The spectator, furthermore, may "participate as a seeing subject who controls and possesses what is shown."<sup>40</sup>

In *Inishmaan* trauma takes the form of repetitive acts. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena."<sup>41</sup> Repetitive actions are performed by Helen, for example, who repeatedly breaks eggs, perhaps symbolically shattering any means of reproduction and thus forecasting the decline of the Aran population. Throughout the play, characters repeat the passage "Ireland



mustn't be such a bad place," completing it, for instance, with "if French fellas want to live in Ireland," "if German fellas want to come to Ireland," etc., as if trying to justify a purposeful existence.<sup>42</sup> Cripple Billy's aunts perform episodes of repetition and intrusive phenomena. Eileen compulsively consumes candy, eating away profits and her means of survival. Kate obsessively communicates with a rock. Repetition manifests as a sort of haunting where the characters relive the unknowable trauma of the past.

Kate and Eileen display a more covert form of intrusive phenomena through repetitive speech. As the play opens, for example, the aunts anxiously await Cripple Billy's return from the doctor:

KATE: Is Billy not yet home?

EILEEN: Not yet is Billy home.

KATE: I do worry awful about Billy when he's late returning home.

EILEEN: I banged me arm on a can of peas worrying about Cripple Billy.

KATE: Was it your bad arm?

EILEEN: No, it was me other arm.

KATE: It would have been worse if you'd banged your bad arm.

EILEEN: It would have been worse, although it still hurt.

KATE: Now you have two bad arms.

EILEEN: Well, I have one bad arm and one arm with a knock.

KATE: The knock will go away.

EILEEN: The knock will go away. . . .

KATE: I do worry awful about Billy when he's late returning home, d'you know?

EILEEN: Already once you've said that sentence.

KATE: Am I not allowed to repeat me sentences so when I'm worried?

EILEEN: You *are* allowed.

KATE (*pause*): Billy may've fell down a hole with them feet of his.<sup>43</sup>

The pattern of repetition that becomes the language's rhythm reverberates with Ireland's notoriously macabre histories. The echoing of "not yet," "home," "worry," "bad arm," etc., resonates with a "language of trauma . . . and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering."<sup>44</sup> Suffering, furthermore, produces a "return of the past as a model for repetitive behavior."<sup>45</sup> "The knock will go away," however, is an assurance of being unharmed. It is the idea of survival, moreover, that is problematic.

The theory of trauma, according to Caruth, operates “as a historical experience of a survival exceeding the grasp of the one who survives.”<sup>46</sup> The performance of trauma is not only “an effect of destruction” but also “an enigma of survival.”<sup>47</sup> Kate and Eileen, therefore, struggle with not the fear of Billy’s death as much as their own survival or “awakening” to life.<sup>48</sup>

In scene five, Kate and Eileen, once again await Cripple Billy’s return:

KATE: Not a word. (*Pause.*) Not a word, not a word, not a word, not a word, not a word, not a word, not a word, not a word. (*Pause.*) Not a word.

EILEEN: Oh how many more times are you going to say ‘Not a word’, Kate?

KATE: Am I not allowed to say ‘Not a word’ so, and me terrified o’er Billy’s travellings?

EILEEN: You *are* allowed to say ‘Not a word’, but one or two times and not ten times.

KATE: Billy’s going to go the same way as his mammy and daddy went. Dead and buried be the age of twenty.<sup>49</sup>

“Dead and buried” and the previous “down a hole” suggest that Cripple Billy already occupies a burial site. How will the aunts survive his death? For Kate and Eileen, losing Cripple Billy, indeed, would be akin to missing their own death. The aunts’ worries about his delayed return, therefore, correlate less with his potential death. They struggle to claim their own survival.<sup>50</sup> Cripple Billy’s departure to Hollywood is a survival effort as well. He tries to do the impossible—to fill the void and feelings of displacement left by his parents’ absence.

Central to the play is the notion of departure and return, similar to Freud’s notion of *fort/da* in which there is no assurance of the return.<sup>51</sup> The themes of exile and departure—and of how those left behind survive—are illuminated. Cripple Billy, for example, consistently seeks knowledge about his absent parents, whom he has never known. Billy’s desire for the pleasurable return of the *da* is a void that he perpetually struggles to fill. He hears conflicting stories that raise questions about whether his parents tried to ensure his death/departure or life/survival.

HELEN: . . . Billy’s mam and dad went and drowned themselves, when they found out Billy was born a cripple-boy.

BILLY: They didn’t go and drowned themselves.

HELEN: Oh aye, aye . . .

BILLY: They only fell o’erboard in rough seas.

HELEN: Uh-huh. What were they doing sailing in rough seas, so, and wasn’t it at night-time too?

BILLY: Trying to get to America be the mainland they were.

HELEN: No, trying to get away from you they were, be distance or be death, it made no differ to them.<sup>52</sup>

Cripple Billy is unsure whether his parents weighted him with rocks in an attempt to bury his disability through drowning him or whether their desire to provide him a better life in America resulted in an unsuccessful escape attempt and their own drowning. The sea encircling the island of Inishmaan is not something to be mastered as reflected in *Man of Aran*; for Cripple Billy, it is a place to be drowned. The surrounding sea, therefore, symbolizes a tomb of sorts, a place of loss, and a location of departure without the promise of return. Death, rather than immortality, envelops the land. How will Cripple Billy survive his parents' deaths? Like the sea sprays that create fissures in the land, the sea itself is a great fissure that entombs unrepresentable traumas of the past.

### Promising a Return

At the end of the film's screening, Cripple Billy's silhouette appears on the makeshift screen, a mere shadow of the mirror image of *Man of Aran*. The community experiences the unexpected but pleasurable *da* of his return from Hollywood. Hollywood's rejection of Billy saved him from succumbing to the grand romantic narrative that originally lures him to escape from Inishmaan. The impact of imaginary notions emits a new awareness for Cripple Billy:

[T]he arse-faced lines they had me reading for them. "Can I not hear the wail of the banshees for me, as far as I am from me barren home." "An Irishman I am, begora! With a heart and a spirit on me not crushed be a hundred years of oppression. I'll be getting me shillelagh out next, wait'll you see." A rake of shite. And had me singing the fecking "Cropppy Boy" then.<sup>53</sup>

Cripple Billy's return marks an abandoning of nostalgic and fantastical ideals. He ends the quest for an empty "otherness" and acquires an awareness of the constructedness of Irishness. He asserts, "I know now it isn't Hollywood that's the place for me."<sup>54</sup>

Cripple Billy's return serves as a threshold that activates other transformations. Throughout the play, he asks to be called just "Billy," desiring to drop "Cripple," but his adventure brings home the realization that there is less difference to erase than previously thought: "[T]here are plenty round here just as cripple as me, only it isn't on the outside it shows."<sup>55</sup> Babbybobby's subsequent beating of Billy serves as a manifestation of Billy's desire to receive comparable treatment, for better or worse. Billy, in addition, now perceives himself as a potential "sweetheart." He

asks Helen “to go out walking . . . some evening,”<sup>56</sup> and, in the end, Helen accepts the invitation.

Billy’s return also inspires others to reveal more desirable characteristics. It happens that Johnny, whose motto in life is, “Do what you want and feck everybody else,”<sup>57</sup> had heroically saved baby Billy and paid the medical expenses as well. Billy further raises awareness and catalyses a process of negotiation by asking, “Do ya have to be so violent, Helen?”<sup>58</sup> Later Helen discloses that she bought Bartley a much-desired telescope for his birthday. Billy reinforces, “That was awful nice of ya, Helen.”<sup>59</sup> She confesses, “I think I must be getting soft in me old age.”<sup>60</sup>

Billy’s deteriorating state of health, however, does not reverse. He will never transfigure into a robust Man of Aran. Billy, in any case, claims his own survival. He learns to map his own path and leads the others to abandon “cripple” notions from their psyches. Caruth states, “The story of trauma . . . far from telling of escape from reality . . . rather attests to its endless impact on a life.”<sup>61</sup> Billy and Helen especially show a willingness to adapt.

Just as he begins to embrace life as a survivor, Billy paradoxically discovers that he is terminally ill; yet his enduring courage and instinct for adaptation foreshadows favorably on Aran life. Billy and Helen’s date signifies confidence in achieving interconnectedness and perhaps symbolizes the potential of a new generation. Although Billy’s diagnosis of tuberculosis will inevitably lead to an early death, the closing lines are promising:

HELEN: Good-oh. I’ll see you the day after tomorrow for our  
fecking walk, so.

BILLY: You will.<sup>62</sup>

### **Mapping New Terrain**

McDonagh’s explosion of Flaherty’s representation of the Aran Islands and the legitimization of his own representation in terms of tracing unrepresentable psychic trauma opens a space for fresh modes of remembering and narrating diverse histories. The conceptual fissures of the conflicting representations, similar to the crevice in the limestone that serves as a site of transformation and renewal, promote a model of interconnectedness that corresponds to the notion of ecological interdependence between human life and the other-than-human environment. The fissures, furthermore, incite a desire for the real, which paradoxically sparks negotiation and transformation. Billy, for example, signals a commencement even at his journey’s end when he realizes the deficiency of grand narratives as mimetic models. He, additionally, discovers that life is not limited to the mappings of traumatic histories; nor is it fixed in the stone landscape. The collisions, such as those of sea and land, ensure a fertile, ever-mutable Aran environment.

Heaney writes in his poem "Lovers on Aran": "Did sea define the land or land the sea? / Each drew new meaning from the waves' collision."<sup>63</sup> Regeneration and the mapping of new terrain are indeed collaborative efforts.

## Notes

1. Seamus Heaney, "The Evening Land," *A World of Stone*, ed. Paul O'Sullivan (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1977) 6.

2. Elizabeth Cowie, "The Spectacle of Actuality," *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999) 22. Cowie examines the relationship between the spectator's desire for the real and the absent trauma re-presented in the performance of war battles in the documentary *War Neuroses* 19-45.

3. 32.

4. 22.

5. See Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996).

6. John Waddell, J. W. O'Connell, and Anne Korff, *Book of Aran: The Aran Islands County Galway* (Co. Galway: Tir Eolas, 1994) 262.

7. John M. Synge, *The Aran Islands* (1907; London: Allen & Unwin, 1961).

8. Although McDonagh claims to have not read Synge's plays until he was in the process of staging his own works, Synge's plays ultimately influence the final versions of many, if not all, of McDonagh's works to date. See Patrick Lonergan, "Druid Theatre's *Leenane Trilogy* on Tour: 1996-2001," *Irish Theatre on Tour*, ed. Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2005) 198. Additionally, it is interesting to note that in his published journal, *The Aran Islands* (1907), Synge describes as his tutor of the Irish language a young man named Martin McDonagh. See Waddell, O'Connell, and Korff, *Book of Aran* 262.

9. Qtd. in Luke Gibbons, "Romanticism, Realism and Irish Cinema," *Cinema and Ireland*, ed. Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons, and John Hill (London: Croom Helm, 1987) 197. See also 250n11. Gibbons quotes J. M. Synge, *Collected Works, II (Prose)*, ed. Alan Pierce (London: Oxford UP, 1966) 283.

10. 197.

11. Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nation* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1997) 65.

12. 87.

13. Waddell, O'Connell, and Korff, *Book of Aran* 267.

14. Robert Flaherty, "Filming Real People," *The Documentary Tradition*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (1971; New York: W. W. Norton, 1979) 97.

15. Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 77.

16. Ruth Barton and Harvey O'Brien, *Keeping It Real: Irish Film and Television* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004) 91.

17. Pat Mullen, *Man of Aran* (1934; Cambridge: M.I.T. P, 1935) 70. Mullen gives accounts in his memoir of how Flaherty bases casting decisions on whether or not screen tests reveal “dramatic” qualities. See also 72, 74, 82, 161, and 178.

18. 139.

19. See *Man of Aran*, dir. Robert J. Flaherty, perf. Colman “Tiger” King, Maggie Derrane, Michael Dillane, Pat Mullin [sic], et. al., HVE, 1934.

20. Qtd. in Kevin Rockett, “Documentaries,” *Cinema and Ireland* 91n2. Rockett quotes Elizabeth Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of the British Documentary: The Story of the Film Movement Founded by John Grierson* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1975) 29.

21. Gibbons, “Romanticism” 201.

22. 201.

23. My use of the phrase “special veracity” is ironical. Attilio Favorini uses this phrase to describe Edwin Piscator’s idea of documentary drama, defined by Piscator as “a central or exclusive reliance on actual rather than imaginary event.” See Favorini, “Introduction: After the Fact: Theater and the Documentary Impulse,” *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theater* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1995) xx.

24. *Árainn: Where One Day is Never Enough*, 11 Feb. 2006 <<http://www.visitaranislands.com/man.html>>. Árainn, an Aran Islands tourism site, lists the schedule of showings of *Man of Aran* and recognizes the role of the film “in bringing the islands to the attention of the world.”

25. Martin McDonagh, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (New York: Vintage International, 1997) 78.

26. Mullen, *Man of Aran* 99. See also 105.

27. McDonagh, *Cripple of Inishmaan* 79.

28. Mullen, *Man of Aran* 82.

29. 82; emphasis added.

30. 105. Mullen calls harpooning an “art.” He writes, “[T]he art of killing [the basking sharks] is lost.”

31. 149. Mullen quotes himself.

32. 33.

33. 218.

34. 239.

35. 223.

36. 117.

37. Kevin Rockett, “Preface,” *Cinema and Ireland* xii.

38. McDonagh, *Cripple of Inishmaan* 85.

39. Cowie, “Spectacle of Actuality” 31. Cowie uses the notion of identification to explain how the spectator engages with narratives of injustice and loss.

40. 29.

41. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 11.

42. McDonagh, *Cripple of Inishmaan* 21 and 52.

43. 5-7.

44. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 9.

45. 59.
46. 66.
47. 58. Caruth argues the enigmatic notions of destruction and survival in relation to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism* in her "Traumatic Departures: Survival and History in Freud," *Unclaimed Experiences* 57-72.
48. 64-65.
49. McDonagh, *Cripple of Inishmaan* 54.
50. Caruth, *Unclaimed* 64.
51. Caruth argues Freud's notion of *fort/da* in relation to his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism* in her "Traumatic Departures" 57-72; see esp. 65.
52. McDonagh, *Cripple of Inishmaan* 23.
53. 88.
54. 88.
55. 92.
56. 108.
57. 100.
58. 105.
59. 112.
60. 112.
61. Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995) 7.
62. McDonagh, *Cripple of Inishmaan* 113.
63. Seamus Heaney, "Lovers on Aran," *An Aran Reader*, ed. Breandán and Ruairí Ó hEithir (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1991) 249.



